THRILLING STORY OF CAPTAIN GRIESSER: LIFE-SAVER

Uncle Sam Pins Gold Medals on Heroic Keeper of Buffalo Life Saving Station for His Many Daring Rescues.

His Almost Superhuman Work in a Rescue Performed in the Face of Overwhelming Odds on Lake Erie, Near Buffalo.

By CHARLES A. HARBAUGH.

AN interesting and unique feature of the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo was the daily maneuvers of the life saving crew on the lake front, composed of picked men from Uncle Sam's professional surfmen under the direction of Lieutenant C. H. McLellan, R. C. S., assistant inspector of the fifth life saving district. These drills were witnessed by thousands daily, the entertainment offered being a mimic rescue from shipwreck, with enough of the element of danger added to satisfy the most exacting.

On the occasion of the first exhibition of the surfmen's skill the realism with which the operation was executed was such as to throw the spectators into a panic, a riot being averted only by the police and the tact of the official in charge of the show. The screams of hysterical women and frightened children and the shouts of frantic men, as the throng of excited humanity surged toward the spot where the life savers were expected to land with the rescued person gave the scene a touch of the tragic which Captain McLellan, with all his attention to detail, had entirely overlooked in arranging the programme.

Alone on a Wreck.

A wreck pole, with yard, designed to represent the rigging of a stranded ship, stood some hundred yards off shore. Perched upon this improvised mast could be seen the form of a man, who, judging from his gesticulations, had succeeded in surrounding himself with imaginary horrors of shipwreck. Down the beach came the life savers on the run, pulling the rescuing apparatus. They unlimbered abreast the make-believe wreck and placed the Lyle gun in position for firing a line over the mast preparatory to sending out the breeches buoy. Up and down the beach and back of the surfmen stood the expectant crowd, waiting to hear the little gun and see its projectile start on its errand of mercy.

Up to this point the proceedings are all "on the square." The spectators knew that what they had already witnessed, and thought that what was yet to come, had been prearranged, but the life savers had a little surprise in store—a denouement to the mimic scene on which they expected to score several rounds of applause, and maybe an encore—the sequel proved them to be consummate actors.

While the men were busying themselves with the gun a man in a small boat was seen coming along the beach. In the general suspense no one took any notice of his movements. As he came nearer his manner of handling his craft and his personal appearance were suggestive of a countryman taking his first outing on the water. The submerged ship was right in his course, and a few awkward pulls at the oars brought him nearer the man waiting for salvation, around whom he paddled two or three times in a careless fashion, the while exchanging remarks with the castaway which those on the beach failed to catch.

Suddenly the rower became excited and stood up in the boat, which, like an ordinary rowboat under similar circumstances, resented the familiarity and pitched its occupant headlong into the water. The crowd saw two wildly gesticulating hands and a terrified face, heard a piteous, strangling cry for help, and then pandemonium reigned.

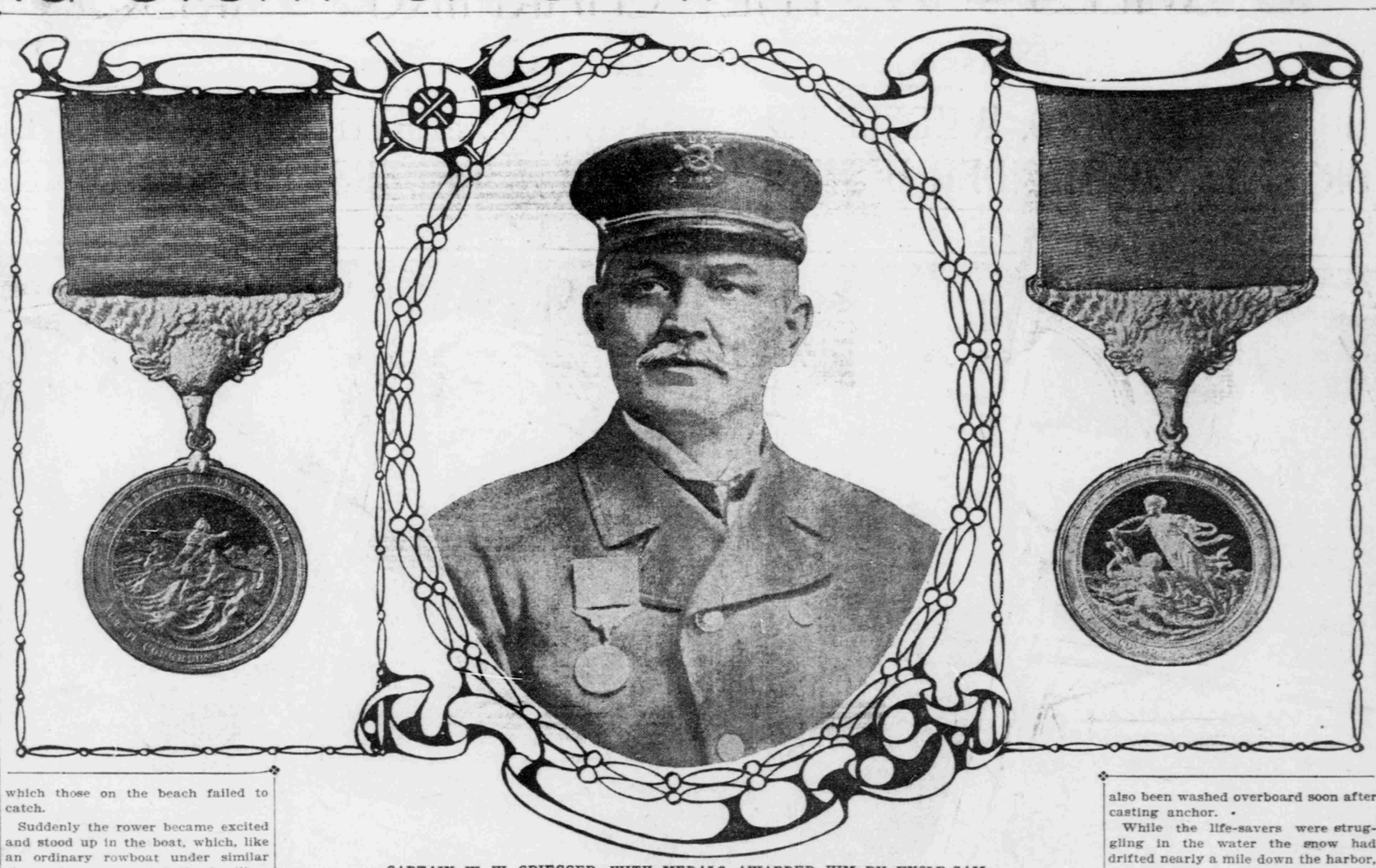
Plunged Into the Water.

The surfmen ran to the lifeboat lying nearby, half out of the water, and pushed off to the rescue, leaving the man on the mast until a more convenient season. They were soon on the spot and one of their number arose in his place at the oars and took a header just as the drowning man went down for the last time. The crew lay by, and presently the rescuer came up and was helped into the boat with his unconscious burden and brought to land, where the limp form was laid upon the sand and the rescuers began the resuscitation operations prescribed by the regulations of the United States Life Saving Service.

Excited the Crowd.

Meantime the excited crowd had pressed down upon them, and the efforts of seven policemen were required to prevent the life-savers from being pushed into the water. After several moments' manipulation the supposedly drowned man jumped to his feet and gave the crowd the laugh. The excitement simmered down as quickly as it started, and those nearest the life-savers walked shamefacedly away.

Thereafter the performance was frequently varied, the fertile ingenuity of Captain McLellan daily introducing some new feature illustrative of the perils attendant upon wreck operations of life-saving crews.



CAPTAIN W. W. GRIESSER, WITH MEDALS AWARDED HIM BY UNCLE SAM.

A Daring Feat

On November 21, 1900, there occurred in the harbor of Buffalo, not far from the scene of these imitation rescues, a feat so daring as to challenge credulity but for the matter-of-fact report of the occurrence on file in the Government archives. The hero in this instance was Captain W. W. Griesser, keeper of the Buffalo Life Saving Station, his gallantry winning for him the gold medal awarded by the United States Government for extraordinary courage displayed in rescuing persons from drowning.

Captain Griesser, Hero.

As I write, the photograph of Captain Griesser lies before me, with the token of his valorous deed pinned to his breast. The clear-cut, well modeled lips and the square jaw and breadth of face suggest determination and physical endurance. Add to this the description appearing opposite his name on the records of the Life Saving Service, and you have an ideal hero; aged forty-seven, height 5 feet 10½ inches, weight 205 pounds, complexion dark, eyes hazel.

On the day in question Surfman Hurd, of Captain Griesser's life saving crew, while in the station lookout, saw through his marine glass a scow break from its moorings away up the harbor, and start out into the open lake. Closer observation disclosed the forms of several men aboard. The surfman descended with all haste and announced his discovery to the keeper, who immediately ordered his men to run out the twenty-six foot lifeboat—part of the equipment of all life-saving stations—into which they all climbed and pulled off.

As they left the shore a tug came along, and Griesser, fearing that it would be impossible to make headway by oars alone, hailed the tug to take them in tow. A terrific gale was sweeping across the lake, churning the water into foam, sending the waves into the harbor mountains high, and causing the craft anchored inside the breakwater to pull at their moorings like wild beasts.

A Dash for the Castaways.

When within thirty rods of the scow Griesser called to the tug to cast them adrift, which was done, the tug immediately turning and making back to the harbor. As soon as the line was dropped the men in the boat made a dash for the scow. While in tow they were able to keep the bow of their craft to the sea, but, left to themselves, they found it next to impossible to maintain this position, and absolutely out of the question to make rapid advance.

Their progress was somewhat facilitated by the use of a small sail, which they had with much difficulty raised, but even with this aid it soon became evident that they could not reach the scow, owing to the rapidly increasing violence of the gale.

They were just on the point of turning back when a giant wave caught and nearly upset the boat, shaking the oarsmen from their seats. They had scarcely recovered from the first impact when another huge comber caught the boat and flung it aloft, and as it descended a third seized it and tossed it end over end, precipitating five of the men into the water, the boat righting itself immediately.

A Dangerous Situation.

Griesser and one of the surfmen grasped the sail, which now hung over the boat's side, while the other men who had been dumped out were picked up by the wave that had spilled them and flung shoreward. The two men still in the boat had the presence of mind to throw over the anchor, which took bottom. The men clinging to the trailing sail, seeing the futility of an effort to get back into the boat, let go their hold and struck out for hte shore, which they and the rest of the crew succeeded in reaching, the two surfmen who had managed to retain their seats in the boat when their comrades were thrown out, having also been washed overboard soon after casting anchor.

While the life-savers were struggling in the water the snow had drifted nearly a mile down the harbor, and struck a row of piling that forms a sand catch, the top of which, usually several feet above water, was completely submerged by the big waves. All the life-savers had reached shore drenched, chilled and thoroughly exhausted, with courage undaunted, but as the lifeboat was still being tossed to and fro out in the lake there was no means at hand by which they could make a second attempt at rescue.

Captain Griesser was in a dilemma, when news came down the beach that all the imperiled men except one had reached land, and that he was clinging to the piling on the lee side of the scow, with every sea burying him out of sight.

Hurried to the Rescue.

Fortunately an engine with steam up stood on the track running along the beach, and upon the invitation of the engineer the surfmen and keeper climbed aboard, and were soon abreast of the scow, which lay about five hundred feet from the shore.

Griesser decided that there was only one way to save the man—by a rope. But the rope had first to be carried out to the piling by a swimmer, there being no object near the scow to which a line sent out by the usual method (with the Lyle gun) could be made fast.

Even if this had been the case there would have been nobody at the other end of the line to fasten the apparatus in position. Another man under similar conditions might have called for volunteers. Griesser did nothing of the kind. He determined to do the carrying himself. His decision met with the vociferous protests of the bystanders, but that made no difference to him—so long as there was an imperiled life at stake and an untried chance to save it.

A Volunteer Offers Aid.

One of his surfmen volunteered to accompany him. The two men removed their storm clothing and heavy boots, then with a line trailing behind them they swam boldly out, only to be hurled back on the beach. The second time they tried it they made better progress, but when a hundred feet from the shore the surfman was thrown against a submerged pile and so seriously injured that he had to give up the contest.

Griesser, however, by diving and taking advantage of the undertow, succeeded in covering 200 feet in the space of fifteen minutes, and clung to a pile to regain his wind before resuming his journey. On the shore the crowd watched his movements with bated breath, and when he reached the piling where he paused for a moment's rest a cheer went up.

But his task was not yet finished. There were still 300 feet between him and the scow, from which he could at intervals hear the despairing cries of the man he had started out to save. Again he struck out, now disappearing beneath the waves, now coming to the surface, each time a little closer to his object. When within thirty feet of the scow he threw his rope, but it fouled and he drew it in. He made a desperate effort to get closer, and again threw the line, but it fell short.

Spurred to Final Effort.

He was about to give up the unequal struggle when a cry from the imperiled man spurred him to one last trial. One instant a wave would carry him within throwing distance, and just as he was on the point of casting the line another rush of water would toss him away, but at length there came a lull in the sea and he got within ten feet of his man.

Calling to him to be ready the line flew through the air, the man extended an arm and it fell within his grasp.

"Tie it around your body and jump," called Griesser.

The castaway was too weak to do as directed, but fastened it to his wrist. Still he hesitated to loosen his hold on the piling.

"Jump!" yelled the keeper as a big wave swept over the piles.

The man let go, and those on the shore holding the other end of the rope ran up the beach, pulling their catch with such swiftness that he did not come to the surface while in transit. Then the heroic keeper mounted a monster wave and rode back to land in state, alighting from his liquid vehicle abruptly and without ceremony, but amid the cheers of the witnesses of his bravery.

The rescued man was unconscious when hauled in, but revived under vigorous treatment.

FAMOUS WADSWORTH HOUSE, IN HISTORIC CAMBRIDGE, AS IT WAS A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AND IS TO-DAY

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ton was ushered when he reached Cambridge. Irving says that in accordance with a resolve of the Provincial Congress, when in session in Watertown, "the president's house in Cambridge, excepting one room reserved by the president (Dr. Langdon) for his own use, was to be taken, cleared and furnished for the reception of the Commander-in-Chief and General Lee."

This was the slovenly but dashing Charles Lee, who, by introducing his dog Spada to all the fine ladies at headquarters, long antedated the person who wrote, "Love me, love my dog."

There is no record showing how long Washington occupied the president's house; but it seems likely, judging by an entry in Thacher's "Military Journal," that he moved to the Vassall house, afterward the Craigie house, and still afterward Longfellow's house, about the middle of July.

Colleges Much Injured.

It may be that Washington desired larger and better quarters; or, as this anecdote suggests, safer quarters. The anecdote was told to Mrs. Quincy, the wife of the Quincy who, after having been five times elected Mayor of Boston, was chosen President of Harvard on January 15, 1829. Dr. Holbrook, by the way, was with the army in Cambridge in 1775 in a professional capacity.

"The President's house was given to the commissary of the army," he relates, "and I was quartered at the house of Mr. Phips, in the neighborhood. The colleges were much injured by the garrison. The rooms in Harvard Hall, except the one then used as a library, were filled with barrels of salt beef, brought by the country people for the army. One day during the siege of Boston a shell thrown by the British from Copp's Hill struck the ground in the square near the President's house. The fuse was yet burning, and a soldier went and stamped it out at the risk of his life."

Since President Felton's day the most prominent occupant of Wadsworth has been the visiting preacher to the university. From February 3 to February 20 last the preacher was the Rev. Washington Gladden, of the First Congregational Church, Columbus, Ohio. Dr. Edward Everett Hale, who was one of the university preachers from 1886 to 1888, gives this sketch of the house in his "Historic Boston:"

Rev. Dr. Hale's Word.

"It is a good type of the architecture of 1700. You see, it has the comfortable and convenient gambrel roof of that time.

"I met a lady yesterday who told me she had read with interest of the life and work of Monsieur Mansard, the French architect, and she asked where she should find the life of Monsieur Gambrel. For our purposes his is a better roof, not to say more picturesque, than the French Mansard. See this fine old balustrade to the stairways and what paneling they had! This handsome parlor on the left is the 'minister's room' (now it is called the 'preacher's room.')

The Preacher's Room.

The preacher's room is plainly but comfortably furnished. Aside from the engraving of Washington, and the portraits of the preachers, there is no picture of great note in the room. The picture of "old Wadsworth," to which Dr. Hale refers, may be there, but it is not marked, as it should be. Over in the farther corner is an alcove, of oblong form, now occupied by a soft couch. Perhaps Wadsworth lounged there; but Washington was too long and bulky to have fitted in there easily. This room is said to have been used by Washington for receptions.

Off the main room, and entered by a two-foot covered passage, somewhat on the style of a pantry, is the room in which Washington slept for two weeks. It contains three green-colored antique chairs that, according to tradition, were in the house in 1775. Two of the chairs appear in one of the accompanying photographs. The seats are upholstered in flowered silk. On class day night, some years ago, one of these chairs disappeared, and the college officers could neither eat nor sleep until it was recovered. It seems that some one took it out into the yard for his fair lady and thence it went astray.

The bedroom has a modern appendage in the shape of a bathroom with the boasted open plumbing.

The Provincial Breath.

There is much about the rooms that exhales the provincial breath and that excites a species of veneration in the mind of the visitor. The original solid doors open by means of the original brass locks and swing upon the original hand-wrought iron hinges. There is the original paneled wainscoting; there is the original tesselated wooden cornice, done by hand; there are the solid window-frames (twenty-four panes to each window); and there, on the side, facing Harvard Square, is the glass door, which Washington may have used on those sultry July nights.

Besides the visiting preacher, Wadsworth is occupied in these days by students (among whom is the son of the Rev. Francis Peabody, the regular university preacher), and by a well known graduate—none other than the Hon. T. T. Myers, Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

Mr. Myers has lived in Wadsworth for twenty-two years, or ever since he entered Harvard. He is the only person outside of porters, students and officials who resides within the college walls.

It was from this house that Washington rode forth to introduce himself to the raw troops who, under his leadership, played horse with the British veterans.

In the diary of Dorothy Dudley for the year 1775 is this entry:

General Washington's Arrival.

"July 3d.—General Washington is here. Yesterday he arrived, by way of Watertown, where he was received by Congress with a congratulatory address, and escorted to Cambridge by a troop of light horse. He went immediately to his quarters at the president's house. It was just as we were returning from church, and our curiosity to see the man of whom we have heard so much was satisfied.

"He is a large man, tall and well-proportioned; his face noble in its suggestion of strength, and dignity, and modesty. Our expectations are more than realized.

"His appearance is one to inspire confidence and love, and to make us grateful for the possession of such a chief. To-day he formally took command, under one of the grand old elms on the Common. It was a magnificent sight. The majestic figure of the General, mounted upon his horse, beneath the wide-spreading branches of the patriarch tree; the multitude thronging the plain around, and the houses filled with interested spectators of the scene, while the air rung with shouts of enthusiastic welcome, as he drew his sword, and thus declared himself Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army."

"Under one of the grand old elms." So there was more than one grand old elm? That's the rub. There was no newspaper reporter on the spot to put down whether it was the sixth elm on the right or the seventh on the left; to note how the General looked that morning or what he said to Lee or Putnam. Mistress Dudley is good enough to speak of his "majestic figure;" but she lacked a sense of definiteness.

Unfortunately, too, photography was not then an art or a family pastime. Fortunately, on the other hand, the souvenir fiend had not come, otherwise in place of a decrepit tree, braced with steel rods, there would be nothing but twigs and bits of bark scattered over the country as if by a cyclone.

This is what Washington Irving says:

Remembered Washington.

"On the 3d of July, the morning after his arrival at Cambridge, Washington took formal command of the army. It was drawn up on the Common, about half a mile from headquarters. A multitude had assembled there, for as yet military spectacles were novelties, and the camp was full of visitors, men, women and children, from all parts of the country, who had relatives among the yeoman soldiery. An ancient elm is still pointed out, under which Washington, as he arrived from headquarters, accompanied by General Lee and a numerous suite, wheeled his horse and drew his sword as commander-in-chief of the armies."

What is nearest to a story by a responsible eye-witness is the account to be found in Sidney Willard's "Memoirs of Youth and Manhood." Mr. Willard relates:

"His stay at the old headquarters [The Vassall House] was necessarily short. The distance from it to the Cambridge Common, by the avenue which leads to the westerly part, is not many rods. At the termination of this avenue on the Common stood, and still stands, in magnificent size and ramifications, the Washington Elm, as it is always called, in conformity with the traditionary fact that it was on this spot that Washington first unsheathed his sword at the head of his troops, marshalled for the defence of the country.

"There, then nine years of age, I distinctly remember sitting on the fence before the old house which still remains at the corner, near the tree, and seeing the majestic warrior, mounted on a fitting steed, 'with all his trim belonging,' pass by. He was there saluted with a discharge of artillery under the direction of General Brooks, who met him at the head of about a thousand militia in their accustomed uniforms. So soon as propriety permitted, he left the training field, the Common, which was in the same sterile and unadorned condition in which he had seen it thirteen years before, and proceeded to Harvard Hall."

The Washington Elm.

The memory of a boy of nine, called upon in old age, is not altogether trustworthy. However, with the exception of Professor Channing, no one who has written on the matter seems to have rejected the tradition.

To-day the Washington Elm is regarded and cared for as a precious relic. Some of the limbs are mere stubs, but still the patriarch looks good for many years more. The trunk, which is the picture of arboreal health, is some eighteen feet in circumference, while the present branches have a spread of about ninety feet.

Thirty years ago, on one blustry Summer night, a limb seventeen inches in diameter was snapped off. A part of the wood, reports the Rev. Alexander McKenzie, was used to make a pulpit for the chapel of a neighboring church (no doubt the Shepard Memorial Church, of which Dr. McKenzie is pastor).

The Tree is to Cambridge what the Rock is to Plymouth.

Many interesting things happened while the Washingtons lived in Cambridge. Dorothy Dudley, in her diary, gives two short descriptions of the General and his wife that are worth quoting because of their rarity.

The General and His Wife.

"Mrs. Washington," she says under date of December 18, 1775, "was at church yesterday with the General. She is a fine-looking lady, with regular features, dark chestnut hair and hazel eyes, and a certain gravity in her carriage which becomes her position."

On January 30, 1776, the diarist says: "Madame Washington has enlivened the monotony of her Winter among us by a reception, on the seventeenth anniversary of her wedding day. . . . The General does not talk much, but is gracious and courteous to all. His lady is very unceremonious and easy, like other Virginia ladies, though there is no lack of dignity in her manner."

This reception was held in the "fine old Vassall mansion," now called the Craigie house, from Andrew Craigie, who bought it in 1793, and rightly offended the pious conservatism of his neighbors by building an ice-cellar and a greenhouse and, as they thought, thereby flying in the face of Providence by spiting the Summer with his ice and the Winter with his flowers.